

The origin of the Irish joke?

Keith Sidwell

Since I've been working in Ireland, it's often struck me as odd that a race which has been conspicuously successful both in intellectual and business spheres throughout the ages and throughout the world should have been stuck with the reputation of stupidity. The joke is even current in Ireland, though here it is the folk from Kerry in the far south-west who play the part of the Irishman in English jokes ('What does the sign say at the top of a Kerryman's ladder?' 'STOP!'). I recently spent some time working on a passage in a Latin poem written for the amusement of the court of Charlemagne (late 8th-9th century A.D.) which also operates with this prejudice.

The poem was written in 796 by the Goth Theodulf, Bishop of Orléans, who had been educated in Spain. It is in epistolary form. It was intended first to circulate among Theodulf's friends and then to be read out before the assembled court. No doubt this was to increase the anticipation and amusement of those in the know when attacks were launched against Theodulf's enemies. One of these was an Irishman called Cadac, who was known by the saint's name Andreas (Andrew). Here is the passage in Latin and a translation slightly adapted from that of Peter Godman in *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance* (London, 1985), where you can go to savour the whole piece (pp. 150-163).

Hie poenasve dabit fugietve simillimus austro,
Utque sit hic aliud, nil nisi Scottus erit.
Cui si litterulam, quae est ordine tertia, tollas,
Inque secunda suo nomine forte sedet,
Quae sonat in 'caelo' prima, et quae in 'scando' secunda,
Tertia in 'ascensu', quarta in 'amicitiis',
Quam sat is offendit, pro qua te, littera salvi,
Utitur – haud dubium quod sonat, hoc et erit.
(Theodulf 25, 167-74)

'He (i.e. Cadac, the Irishman) will pay the penalty or will flee like the South Wind, and however he may (sc. try to) be something else, he will be nothing but an Irishman. If you took away the letter which is third in the order (i.e. alphabet), the letter which by chance occupies the second position in his name, is the first which sounds in *caelo*, the second in *scando*, the third in *ascensu*, and the fourth in *amicitiis*, which he meets often enough, instead of which he uses the letter of the saved man –

he would without doubt be the very sound that he makes.'

Cadac the sot

The Carolingian writers liked puzzles. This passage provides a nice one. The point of it seems to be as follows. Cadac was pronouncing the letter *c* as the sound [s] in *sap*. It's the 'letter of the saved man' because the saved man is the saint. These are the only people who get straight to heaven in the middle ages! *S* is the standard abbreviation of *sanctus* 'saint'. He is doing this because he desires to ingratiate himself with the locals. So he's trying to pronounce his Latin as he thinks it would be pronounced in Francia. In Ireland *c* would mostly be sounded as [k] in *cod*. On the continent it would be sounded as [ts] in Botswana before *e* and *i*, as [k] in *cod* before *a*, *o* and *u*. He encounters a problem. Old Irish, Cadac's native language, does not possess the sound [ts] in the required positions. So he inadvertently simplifies and comes out with [s] whenever he tries to say [ts]. This sort of failure many of us encounter when we try to imitate the sounds of a foreign language. Try saying *Dvořak*. He is the victim of another common error of second-language learners also, though. He does not observe that *c* sounds as [k] before an *o* in the local phonology. He overgeneralises, and this leads him to try to pronounce *all cs* as [ts] and *scs* as [sts], even before *a* and *o*. Theodulf puts this down to his ignorance and lack of correct learning.

Poor Cadac! The result is this. When someone asks him what his nationality is, what he *should* say is *Scottus sum* 'I'm an Irishman'. But his reply in fact comes out as *Sottus sum*, which in modern Dublin would be 'Oi'm an eejut' (= 'I'm an idiot'). There's probably a further barb hidden in the words chosen to illustrate Cadac's pronunciation problem. If you change what has to be changed, but keep these words in the same order, you get the following sentence: *caelum scando ascensu amicitiarum* 'I climb the heavens by a ladder of friendships'. Instead of trying to attain immortality by learning, like other scholars, Cadac, who is 'educationally challenged' (to be 'politically correct'), cynically utilises his contacts to reach the heights.

Another more famous joke on the same words centring on figures from more or less the same period is reported by the 12th-century English writer William of Malmesbury. It comprises a conversation between the grandson of Charlemagne, Charles the Bald, and the Irish philosopher John Scottus Eriugena, whose patron he was. This *Scottus* can be seen on our £5 notes (see illustration). The pair are to be envisaged sitting opposite one another at a table. The king asks John: *Quid distat inter Scottum atque sottum?* 'What stands (i.e. is the difference) between an Irishman (*Scottus*) and a fool (*sottus*)?' Eriugena's reply: *Tabula tantum.* 'Only a table . . . !' *Touché*. It may be apocryphal, but it was obviously already the standard racial jibe against the Irish in the Middle Ages. The reporter of Eriugena's witty response gives credit where credit was due. Eriugena ('born in Ireland') was the foremost Greek scholar in Western Europe at a time when the language was almost unknown. No

Summer Schools for him: he had to teach himself from textbooks even less user-friendly than *Reading Greek*. He was the author of many impressive works, including the *Peri Physeon* 'On Nature'. No fool this boy, even though his works were later condemned as heretical.

Latin spreads from Ireland

Of course, the modern Irish joke stems from the contempt generally shown by the English towards the catholic Irish in more recent times, both in Ireland during the 'Protestant Ascendancy' and in England, to where many were forced to emigrate in the last century, to support themselves by manual work, often digging the canals as 'navvies' or 'navigators'. That emigration has continued ever since, leading to the continued presence of the native-born Irish marked out by their highly distinctive accents and their unusual syntax (derived from 'pidginisation' with Irish: e.g. 'The plane's only after landing' = 'The plane has just landed'). This is the direct source of portraits such as the Irish builder O'Reilly in *Fawlty Towers*. This diaspora is also the reason why the highly successful (Republic of) Ireland football team is peculiarly subject to a new prejudice, which accuses its members of *not* being Irish (e.g. 'What sort of an Irish name is Cascarino?' I recommend as an antidote buying fish and chips at the long-established Dublin emporia of Beschoff's or Macari's). It would be a nice irony if we could connect the beginnings of the prejudice against Irish intelligence with the remarkable contribution made by the Irish missionaries to the revival of Latin learning in the early Middle Ages both in Britain (at the monastic centres of Iona, Lindisfarne, and Malmesbury) and on the continent (at Bobbio and St Gall).

Keith Sidwell is co-author of Reading Greek and Reading Latin. His Reading Medieval Latin is due out from CUP in late 1994. He teaches at Maynooth College, Co. Kildare (NUI) and has been attempting to disguise his English accent during the World Cup Finals. For those with iron constitutions, the full version of this piece is available in Journal of Medieval Latin 2 (1992).